

sunset to-night till sunrise to-morrow. Your men will be in charge of your most trusted aide. They must be within touching distance of each other, so that there will be no possibility of any person passing between them. You will see that this building is empty during the night and arrest and search anyone who attempts to get through your guard. Keep these orders to yourself and report to me to-morrow morning."

The Prefect, a man of a few words, retired, and the President, folding up his papers, left the Chamber.

THAT evening, a gala performance was given in the Opera House. The President occupied the State box and received an ovation loud and long. The house, crammed with the leaders of wealth, fashion and commerce, was blazing with light and jewels. Every patriotic sentiment was welcomed with enthusiasm—the spirit of victory was in the air. In the morning, the Prefect brought his report. The building had been encircled by men the night through—there had been no unusual circumstance, no trespass, no arrests. The President dismissed him with smiling thanks, and as he did so his Secretary entered the room. "This was found, Sir, this morning, in the same place as the one I brought you yesterday." His Chief's face paled a little as he ripped open the envelope which was handed him. It was a duplicate of the previous one.

The session of the Committee on defence was that day a long and animated one—specially summoned, the extraordinary circumstances of the two letters were laid before them, and, as was to be expected, these unusual missives called forth great differences of opinion. At the present stage of the conflict, the threats of a friend of Crevia could move but little the leaders of Apulia, but here, somewhere, was a man who could defy their guards and serve his prophetic fulminations at will.

Finally a compromise was reached. No change way, of course, to be made in the military programme, but, to satisfy some doubters, the war office, which stood in the centre of a large square used as a parade ground, was to be strictly guarded day and night by troops encamped beneath its very walls. Traffic through the square was to cease—the building itself be carefully searched for underground passages or other source of danger, and the public was to be rigidly excluded from the vicinity, until the fated night should pass. The meaning of all these preparations was studiously kept from the citizens, who regarded them as in some way connected with the approaching end of the war. The commands were given only to the most trusted officers and so the days passed uneventfully enough till the night of prophecy arrived.

Soft fell the purple shades over Tarsis, as the President sat on the villa balcony watching his city twinkle into outline. The last faint streaks of colour faded into blue and gray, and far stretched her streets and avenues pin-pointed with yellow diamonds of light. Clean and massive rose the dome of the War Office, dominating all with the springing beauty of its vaulted roof. Lost in thought, he gazed and gazed, "My country, my city," he breathed, till some mellow-throated bell struck midnight and he turned to go.

And as he did so a sudden tremor ran through the heavy floor where he stood, and, wheeling instantaneously to look at the War Office, he saw a gigantic column of vivid flame spring from its very heart, and turn night into day. A roar as of some unloosed volcano rent the shuddering silence as the walls and dome fell apart into shattered fragments—he saw the mutilated bodies of his soldiers flung headlong across the square and, an instant later, heard descending fragments of the once titanic structure crashing through the roofs of nearby buildings with death and destruction in their train.

Where once had been the War Office lay a mountain of blazing ruin from which the soldiers were desperately endeavoring to drag the bleeding bodies of their comrades. Stupified, the President stared at it all. "My God," he said, "The Friend of Crevia has a heavy hand," and then rushed to the scene of devastation.

Crevia lay gasping for breath in the merciless grip that had daily tightened upon her. The three hundred miles that lay between the two cities was now almost entirely Apulian territory, and only a fringe of barren peaks thrust up between the crouching foe and their prey. The new leadership had been but a flash in the pan, the bow-string was slack and over-stretched, the men could no longer respond to appeal and exhortation. The strongest minds were giving way to the pressure of a year's disaster, and the impoverished fields had ceased to produce even a minimum of nourishment.

It happened on a morning that the sentry in front of the Government buildings found a letter

addressed to the President which was immediately handed to that anxious and sorely strained official. It was sealed but unstamped and had been discovered lying near the threshold of the main doors. It read as follows:

"Let Crevia be strong and fight on. The time of her deliverance has come. You are about to hear strange news of Tarsis. It will be a true word that will come to you. This is the beginning of the end. Fight on; fight on.

"A Friend of Crevia."

The President was perplexed—anxious to grasp at every straw—too many crafty schemes of the Apulians had been unearthed in recent disastrous months to give the letter even the semblance of truth, and he turned wearily to read the reports from the front. As he did so word was brought to him that a detail of the Third Regiment in charge of a prisoner awaited him with important news, and in a few minutes he was volleying quick, searching questions. The hill country between Crevia and Apulia was peopled by a nomadic race whose loyalty was a question of the waxing and waning power of either republic, and so it came that it was one of these hill men taken in a sortie from the Crevian entrenchments who stood before the President, tattered and in bondage, but in no way abashed or dismayed. From his jumbled version of the news of the Apulian camp stood forth one fact, that there had been explosions and great loss of life in Tarsis and that further devastation was threatened by some unknown enemy unless the invading forces were withdrawn from Crevian territory.

The President stared first at the letter and then at his prisoner. Was it possible, had the stars in their courses turned against Apulia? and then, as if written in flame, he read again: "Fight on, fight on." To summon his Council to lay the startling facts before them was a short matter, but to invigorate them with his own wild hopes was more difficult; finally, however, one last impassioned appeal was sent to people, troops and navy. Though every nook and cranny of the beleagued city ran a thrill as the strange story unfolded itself. It filtered into hospital and prison, it rioted down narrow streets of the lower town. The fleet flashed back a brief dispatch of undaunted courage; men in trenches laid lean cheeks against brown rifle stocks and their aim was clear and true.

THE shadow of a great doubt had fallen over Tarsis and the council was divided. Out of the invisible, some ghostly hand was reaching for her throat, a defenceless throat, for there was nothing against which to guard. The minutest precautions were evidently of no avail, and to cap the tense climax, the same impalpable messenger had placed another letter in the same public spot:

"I have spoken once. I shall speak but once again. By the third night from to-day you will evacuate the forts on the foothills of Tarsis, for they shall presently cease to exist. If Apulia is then content to withdraw her forces by land and sea, a white flag will be hoisted on the Cathedral tower at mid-day. If this is done further destruction will cease and my terms will be found on the Cathedral steps. If no flag is hoisted, Tarsis herself shall pass away in blood and fire.

"A Friend of Crevia."

It was now impossible to conceal further the situation from the Tarsians. The foothill forts lay on the edge of the plain. They guarded the city aqueducts and were distant perhaps 10 miles from the War Office square. Their normal complement of men was two thousand each, but at this time they were largely occupied by new recruits and men invalided home from the front. They lay in sight of the city, like titanic watch-dogs in repose.

From all points came a fierce demand that the Government should avert the possibility of another butchery, such as occurred the day before. The friends and relatives of the Garrisons swarmed out across the plains to bring their own to safety. The Government, imperilled, despite its long record of success, was helpless to stem the tide, and the following day the forts were evacuated. There was no time to remove guns or ammunition, and when the sun set on the day of doom its last rays slanted across deserted ramparts and huge but helpless engines of war.

So, in doubt and fear of the terror unseen, Tarsis climbed to her house tops and watched and waited for what the night should bring.

Far were flung the sweeping searchlights, till their swinging beams lighted with a ghostly radi-

ance the glacies and embrasures of the fated forts. Once again the darkness throbbed with the music of mellow midnight bells, and then, as if their vibrations had marked the birth of calamity, the hill-sides flashed yellow with gigantic mushrooms of lifting flame, and a few seconds later came the hideous roar of rapidly following concussions. The night split into an inferno of destruction and hell broke loose. From the three forts came booming a maelstrom of savage irregular explosions, for the bomb-proof ammunition vaults were rent asunder, and in their granite bowels a thousand shells were bursting.

Across the sleeping meadows came the terror and the fury of it—this orgy, this debauch of immeasurable, of irresistible ruin. Its duration was but short, and presently the glare died out and fitfully through starlit silence came dull, muffled bursts of sound, as of minute guns fired in desolation and sorrow over the grave of a nation's hope.

THE sun thrust his red arm over the horizon of Tarsis and looked on strange things. A multitude of palid-faced people thronged the squares and public places. They swarmed in front of the President's villa, where the National Committee was rising exhausted and drawn from a Session which no stretch of fancy had ever foretold. They peered with protruding eyes over the shoulders of a double line of guards who stood with loaded rifles around the Cathedral steps and gazed with the stupor of a dull despair. For there against one of the bronze doors lay a plain white envelope—pregnant with dire potentiality—just a plain white envelope—and from it the courage and pride of Tarsis recoiled in unnamed fear. Presently down the streets came the sibilant echo of a city's excited whisper and the crowds fell back as the soldiers forced a lane through them. With set features, the President himself, looking to neither right or left, mounted the grey stone steps. The little patch of white rested where the invisible hand had left it. The President stooped, picked it up, gazed earnestly at it, and slowly, very slowly opened it. Some magnetic force communicated itself from one to the other of the crowd—all was as still as death. The windows that looked on the scene were jammed with questioning faces and in the centre of it all that quiet figure, with a letter in his hand.

Presently he raised his eyes from the paper and beckoned to his Secretary. A few words not overheard, and the latter disappeared into a side door of the Cathedral. The President moved not at all, nor raised his eyes from the letter, but after a pause that seemed brooding with fate, he looked up; not at the crowd, not at his soldiers, but at the tower, where, climbing slowly into air as though shame delayed its halting progress, mounted the first white flag that had ever fluttered over the soil of Apulia.

Tarsis had surrendered to her invisible enemy.

As in a thicket, small creatures noiselessly disappear before rain and storm, are upon them, the Tarsians went each man to his own home. They knew their President as a patriotic and fearless man, and at the sight of him stripped of his power in their midst, under that shameful ensign, there entered into their hearts the conviction that in this act alone lay the salvation of their city. The guard was dismissed burning with helpless fury; across wide plains the gossamer wires throbbed with orders which made men in trenches break their rifles across their knees. The blockading fleet, in obedience to its instructions, withdrew and left the Crevian vessels alone upon the restless seas they had so desperately protected. The swiftest cruiser in the line of defence, scarred and streaked with long service, laid her course for home, and, as she drew in to the harbour, the sailors saw that the docks so long deserted were packed with a tumultuous and cheering crowd, and hardly had her launch touched land when they learned that firing at the front had ceased at mid-day and that the President of Apulia had sent a request under a flag of truce for a conference with his brother of Crevia.

The terms dictated by the hand unseen were brief, but charged with the dominating spirit of the conqueror:

1. Apulia should surrender all areas gained in the war and indemnify Crevia for loss by land and sea.

2. An offensive and defensive alliance should forthwith be arranged between the two republics.

These were the words that seared the President's eyes as he stood on the Cathedral steps.

The message concluded with a request that the two Presidents should meet in a little village near the old boundary on the following day and execute their national acceptances.

Through purple shades and dew-spread meadows

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